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Nasty ads close out a mud-caked campaign

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By Susan Page, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — It's a dangerous world.

To be a political candidate, that is.

Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry is a lot like Adolf Hitler, an ad on the Internet warns. North Carolina Rep. Brad Miller wants to make America "one big fiesta for illegal aliens and homosexuals," a radio spot featuring cheerful mariachi music claims. Indiana Rep. Chris Chocola opposes medical care for wounded vets, a TV ad suggests.

REALITY CHECK: [Attacks vs. facts in ads](#)

And Pennsylvania Senate candidate Bob Casey? Electing him apparently would risk nuclear annihilation.

A record \$2 billion is being spent on candidate and independent "issue" TV ads during this campaign, estimates Evan Tracey of TNSMI/Campaign Media Analysis Group, a firm that tracks political ads. In the last 60 days, he says, an unprecedented 90% of the ads have been negative.

Some attack ads accurately criticize candidates for votes they've cast and positions they've taken, an analysis by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Political Fact Check found, but many of the ads amount to what the report called "political mudslinging." Spots by both parties distort the truth or leave a misimpression in an effort to make a candidate seem unacceptable and his election foolhardy, even dangerous.

Political forces have combined this year in "a perfect recipe for attack advertising," says John Geer, a Vanderbilt University political scientist and author of *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. "The parties are continuing to polarize, and the stakes are high because who controls Congress is in play."

What's more, neither side has much of a positive agenda to spotlight, he says, particularly on the issue foremost on many voters' minds: the war in Iraq.

Voters routinely decry negative ads and insist they ignore them.

In a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll last month, seven in 10 said they believed "not much" or "nothing at all" of what they heard in political ads. By more than 2-to-1, they said most of the TV commercials they've seen this year have been negative.

Twenty-eight percent said most ads have been "very" or "extremely" negative, compared with just 4% who said most have been "very" or "extremely" positive.

The survey of 1,007 adults Oct. 6-8 had a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

The "toxicity" of the political environment may discourage some people from bothering to go to the polls, says Page Gardner of Women's Voices, Women Vote, a group that encourages political participation by single women. "They're sick of the who-shot-John syndrome," she says.

Nevertheless, campaigns deploy negative ads because they work.

A Notre Dame study of advertising in the 2004 presidential campaign concluded that negative ads were much

more likely than positive ones to weaken support for a candidate. Five percent of voters said their support for their favored candidate was weakened after viewing a positive ad for the opposition, while 14% said their support was weakened after seeing a negative ad targeting their side.

"They hated the negative ads, they saw positive ads as being more persuasive and influential, and yet that was not the effect," says Joan Phillips, a marketing professor who helped lead the study.

The non-partisan Fact Check analysis, released last Friday, concluded that the National Republican Congressional Committee had spent \$41.9 million attacking Democratic opponents and \$5 million supporting its own candidates. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee had spent \$18 million attacking Republican opponents and \$3.1 million supporting its own candidates.

The proportion of negative ads was much higher than in 2004, when Federal Election Commission records show that the political parties spent about \$6 on ads in favor of congressional candidates for every \$5 spent opposing candidates.

Some negative ads, including tough ones, tap humor. Over the past few days, Republican gubernatorial candidates in Minnesota, Texas and Wisconsin began airing 60-second radio ads that mimic Anheuser-Busch's sarcastic "Real Men of Genius" spots for Bud Light.

In Texas, as a singer croons in the background, a mock-serious announcer "salutes" Democrat Chris Bell as "Mr. Way-Too-Liberal-For-Texas Guy."

In Wisconsin, a similar ad dubs Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle "Mr. Tax-Hiking-Politician Man."

The tone isn't likely to lift as the campaign heads into its final weekend, Tracey says, especially in competitive contests. He likens political advertising to a jury trial: "Opening arguments" in which a candidate introduces himself or herself — and, often, the spouse, kids and dog — followed by a period of attack and counterattack. Then there are "closing arguments."

A candidate who's safely ahead may turn to "a warm-and-fuzzy" appeal at the end, Tracey says. "But if you're losing, that's when you start to throw your haymaker."

Reality check: Attacks vs. facts in political commercials



	On corruption	On Iraq	On national security	On character
Race	New Jersey, Senate	North Carolina, 11th Congressional District	Pennsylvania, Senate	Ohio, 1st Congressional District
Candidates	Bob Menendez (D) vs. Tom Kean (R)	Charles Taylor (R) vs. Heath Shuler (D)	Rick Santorum (R) vs. Bob Casey (D)	Steve Chabot (R) vs. John Cranley (D)
Title	Politicos	Troops	Baltic Avenue	Judgment
Sponsor	Free Enterprise Fund Committee, an anti-tax group	Heath Shuler for Congress	Rick Santorum for Senate	National Republican Congressional Committee
Description	In a parody of HBO's <i>The Sopranos</i> , a fast-talking "gangster" in a black leather jacket tells someone on his cellphone "we got a problem" because "our boy down in Washington, Bob Menendez, he's caught in	Ominous music plays as the narrator says, "Charles Taylor talks about supporting our troops. But what's he done?" The ad says Taylor "cut veterans' benefits, opposed health	Sounds of an explosion accompany images of the presidents of North Korea and Iran, followed by the sight of a mushroom cloud. The narrator says North Korea is "close to a nuclear missile to reach North	Saying Cranley's judgment "ranges from bad to bizarre," a narrator says he "voted to allow children as young as 7 to be Tased. Seven-year-olds, Tased, with 50,000 volts of electricity." A pig-tailed girl

	<p>this federal investigation." Using a signature <i>Sopranos</i> phrase, he adds: "Ba-da-bing, we're in it, but deep."</p>	<p>care for the National Guard." It says Shuler will "make sure returning troops have health care."</p>	<p>America" but says "Casey opposes deploying a missile-defense system now."</p>	<p>in a school lunchroom is shown as a jagged, Frankenstein-style line of "electricity" sizzles across the screen.</p>
Reality check	<p>A federal grand jury in September subpoenaed records of a lease agreement between Menendez and his tenant, a non-profit agency. It's not known whether the senator is a target of the investigation; he says he's not. There's no evidence to support the suggestion that Menendez is "our boy down in Washington" for organized crime.</p>	<p>Taylor did vote against an amendment to expand health care for Guard troops and Reservists. The ad doesn't explain that those soldiers and their families already get full military health insurance for 90 days before and during active duty and 180 days after they return from active duty.</p>	<p>North Korea has tested missiles and a nuclear device, but it's unclear how successful the test was or whether North Korea has the technological ability to place a nuclear weapon on a missile that could reach U.S. soil. Casey says he supports more research to determine if the deployment of a missile-defense system is viable.</p>	<p>As a member of the Cincinnati City Council, Cranley voted in 2005 against raising from 7 to 10 the minimum age for a suspect to be targeted by a Taser stun gun. City police officials opposed the measure, saying a Taser might be the least dangerous option available to use on a child who was armed.</p>
	By Susan Page	By Andrea Stone	By Andrea Stone	By Susan Page

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